

## Chapter 8

### The Politicization of Immigration in Britain

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This chapter explores patterns of politicization of immigration in Britain. The first main part focuses on the history of immigration into this country since 1945 and the emergence of a mainstream party consensus based on restrictive immigration legislation paired with anti-discrimination legislation, which characterized the period from the mid-1960s until the late 1990s. The second section analyses patterns of politicization, exploring the levels of salience, polarization and ‘frames’ employed in the debate, especially during 1995-2009 which constitutes the empirical core of the study. The last main part examines potential explanations for the relatively high levels of public concern about immigration and integration, focusing especially on: key social developments; the actions of specific groups; the impact of policies; and the nature of the ‘Political Opportunity Structure’ (POS) (see Chapter 1 on the common framework used in analysing countries in this volume).

#### 8.1 A brief history of migration and its politicization in Britain

Although Britain had experienced prior periods of immigration, it was only in the post-1945 era that ‘coloured’ people arrived on a notable scale. The 1948 British Nationality Act codified the right to free entry of all Commonwealth citizens and those from Eire, whose territory had been a part of the United Kingdom prior to the 1920s (Hansen, 2000). Against a background of full employment this led to new immigration, initially mainly from the West Indies followed by further arrivals from the Indian sub-continent. Before the introduction of the Conservatives’ restrictive Commonwealth Immigration Act in 1962, around 500,000 such immigrants had arrived. Subsequent family reunification added notably to these numbers, as

did the arrival of Asians expelled from former British African colonies in the 1960s and 1970s. However, large-scale emigration especially to Old Commonwealth countries, has made the UK a net-immigration country only since the mid-1980s (Layton-Henry, 2004: 318-323).

Since the 1990s, there has been a growth in non-Commonwealth immigration, including asylum seekers. European Union (EU) expansion in the new millennium further added to immigrant numbers, far beyond the expectations of the British government. Combined with high birth rates in many of these groups, this has led to a predominantly white England taking on a more speckled hue (most immigrants have settled here rather than in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). England's total population of 51,809,700 in 2009 was made up of 87.5 per cent 'whites'. Of the largest minorities, 6.1 per cent were Asian/Asian British, 2.9 per cent Black/Black British and 1.8% 'mixed persons' (BBC, 2012a).

#### *Politicization of immigration during the 1940s-1980s*

The post-war settlement of coloured immigrants became increasingly associated with 'bottom-up' social and urban problems, including 'race riots' in Notting Hill (London) and Nottingham in 1958. The potential for politicization of these developments is underlined by two events. In the 1964 general election, a Conservative candidate was elected Member of Parliament (MP) for Smethwick after a campaign which became associated with the slogan: 'if you want a nigger for a neighbour, vote Labour' (Hansen, 2000). Four years later, a former contender for the Conservative leadership, Enoch Powell, made his 'Rivers of Blood' speech, which predicted racial violence and advocated voluntary immigrant 'repatriation'. Although he was dismissed from the Conservative Shadow Cabinet which eschewed overt 'top down' politicisation, opinion polls showed considerable support for Powell's views and his return to the theme in 1970 may well have swung the general election to the Conservatives (on bottom-up and top-down approaches see Table 1.1).

The Conservatives had sought to defuse the issue by the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act, which introduced controls (Geddes, 2003). Labour initially opposed the Act, but opinion poll evidence which showed that it was increasingly perceived as 'soft' on immigration and signs of growing unemployment led to acceptance of restrictions combined with legislation to protect minorities. The first example of the latter innovation was the 1965 Race Relations Act, which made illegal racial discrimination (despite the discrediting of the scientific value

of the term 'race', 'race relations' remains common terminology in the UK). Henceforth, the Labour Party adopted the more liberal positions towards ethnic minority protection. The Conservatives were usually in the van of seeking further restrictions on immigration, though it was a Conservative government which took Britain into the European Union in 1973 with the concomitant right of free entry to these nationals.

Against a background of growing economic problems and the much-publicized arrival of expelled Ugandan and Malawian Asians, the period after the late 1960s was marked by a surge of anti-immigration parties. Under the leadership of the former overt neo-Nazi, John Tyndall, the National Front (NF) attracted localized support, including almost 120,000 votes in the 1977 Greater London Council elections. However, it dismally failed to make a national breakthrough, hampered by 'top-down' factors of the British electoral system and inter-party divisions, as well as 'bottom-up' actions of groups like the Anti-Nazi League and the media in tagging the party as extremist. It is also important to note the rise of Margaret Thatcher to the Conservative Party's leadership, not least her willingness to court potential NF voters: although economic issues featured more prominently in the 1979 general election campaign, polls indicated that concerns about immigration were strong among the electorate. Subsequently the Conservative government tightened the conception of British citizenship in the 1981 British Nationality Act, whilst the 1982 Falklands War and anti-European rhetoric strengthened Thatcher's nationalist credentials (Schain, 2008).

#### *Politicization of immigration from the 1980s onwards*

Although immigration control declined as a political issue, the eruption of riots in places such as Brixton (London), Toxteth (Liverpool) and St Pauls (Bristol) in 1981, and Tottenham (London) in 1986 drew attention to problems relating to the integration of ethnic minorities, especially the second generation. This led to a growing willingness to deal with community leaders and provide funds at the local level to help further integration, though in general it was Labour which benefitted electorally from the political participation of ethnic minorities. This helped limit violent outbursts, though further disturbances by ethnic minority groups took place at Bradford in 1995 and especially in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford during the spring and early summer of 2001, although in these cases the violence involved young whites and Muslims rather than Afro-Caribbeans.

Both the 1981 and 2001 disturbances led to official inquiries into their causes. In the former case, reports highlighted issues of policing, including poor relationships with young blacks. This analysis was confirmed in a more comprehensive form following the killing of the black teenager Stephen Lawrence in 1993 and its flawed police investigation. The 1999 McPherson Report concluded that 'institutional racism' was rife in the police. Analysis of the 2001 troubles noted continued policing problems, but especially highlighted the need for far greater 'community cohesion' (Geddes, 2003). This term quickly became fashionable among those who sought to point not only to residential segregation in some urban areas, but also to the allegedly divisive effects of 'multiculturalism' and the decline of a sense of common national identity.

The 2001 events reinforced fears that had first surfaced in a major way during the 'Salman Rushdie Affair', which began in 1988 with the furore surrounding the publication of his allegedly blasphemous book, *The Satanic Verses*. Protests by British Muslims who supported the Ayatollah Khomeini's fatwa fuelled concerns about the growth of Islamic Fundamentalism in Britain (Layton-Henry, 2004), though arguably 'community cohesion' in the new millennium has been more threatened by a section of the tabloid media, such as the *Daily Express* and *Daily Mail*, whose coverage has been seen by critics as a form of Islamophobia (Moore, Mason and Lewis, 2008). For example, the *Express* front cover headline on 2 November 2005 proclaimed: 'Christmas Is Banned: It Offends Muslims', while the *Mail's* front page on 29 June 2009 told its readers: 'Britain Has 85 Sharia Courts'. Although the tone was different, after the 9/11 terrorist attacks television broadcasting similarly often focused on 'bad news' about Muslims, both in Britain and abroad (Flood et al 2011; Polson and Kahle, 2010).

At the same time, debate on entry controls resurfaced as immigration began to increase again. In particular, it was sparked by the expansion of asylum seekers who averaged 46,000 per year between 1991 and 1998, though this placed Britain only sixth in absolute numbers among the EU 15 member-states (Wunderlich, 2011: p.13). This trend led the Conservative government to expand restrictions on asylum through the enactment of the 1993 and 1996 Asylum and Immigration Acts (Messina, 2007). Following the return of the Labour Party to government in 1997, the asylum system was further reformed through the enactment of several Acts which were predominantly restrictive.

However, the Labour government also adopted a narrative of ‘managed migration’ enshrined in the 2002 White Paper ‘Secure Borders, Safe Haven’ that emphasized the economic benefits of labour migration. Well before the Eastern expansion of the European Union in 2004, there was a willingness to accept new migration on neo-liberal economic grounds that characterized ‘New’ Labour’s political economy (after losing four general elections in a row from 1979 it had sought hard to demonstrate that economic growth was safe in its hands and sought to eschew ‘Old’ Labour policies such as incomes controls). Moreover, the Labour government presided over a liberalization of migrants’ access to family reunion that supported the further growth of net immigration.

As well as the impact of new immigration, the period 2004-2006 saw a number of successive crises at the Home Office concerning the management of inflows that were followed by the resignation of an Immigration Minister as well as two successive Home Secretaries. In May 2007, Tony Blair stepped down as Prime Minister in favour of Gordon Brown, who sought to further tighten policy in some areas whilst also highlighting the need to create a new sense of national unity and purpose. This change of rhetoric included references at two major trade union conferences in 2007 to ‘British jobs for British workers’. The similarity, between these speeches and a prominent slogan of the BNP led to accusations that the government was trying to shore up its working class support in marginal seats, especially in northern England (Eatwell, 2010).

The BNP was formed by Tyndall in 1982, but it languished largely in obscurity until after Nick Griffin, a Cambridge graduate, captured the party leadership in 1999. Influenced by the success of ‘populist’ continental parties, and the role of campaigning on highly localized issues in its sole local election success at Millwall in 1992, Griffin set about ‘modernising’ the party. This included dropping its signature commitment to ‘compulsory’ repatriation and street politics. The party began to gather votes, initially especially in Burnley, then Barking and Stoke, all former areas of Labour strength (Eatwell and Mudde 2003). In the 2009 European elections, which were fought against a background of scandals about MPs’ expenses as well as growing economic fears, it won 6.3 per cent of the national vote and returned two MEPs, including Griffin. However, in the 2010 general election it fared worse in percentage terms, weakened especially by a continued ‘spoiled identity’ and an alternative nationalist party in the shape of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), which campaigned strongly against immigration in many areas. In the 2014 European elections, the BNP vote slumped losing both its seats, whilst UKIP won more votes than any other party.

## 8.2 Patterns of Politicization

This chapter now turns to the findings of our research project, backed up by other relevant information. The politicisation of immigration and integration is measured by a systematic study of political claims in the tabloid Conservative *Daily Mail* and liberal broadsheet *The Guardian*.

### *The degree of politicization*

This section presents first the analysis of salience of immigration and integration, which is depicted in Figure 8.1 below. The figure presents the numbers of claims on selected days and the moving average, which is better suited for describing long-term trends.

**Figure 8.1: Salience of Immigration and Integration in the United Kingdom, 1995 to 2009**

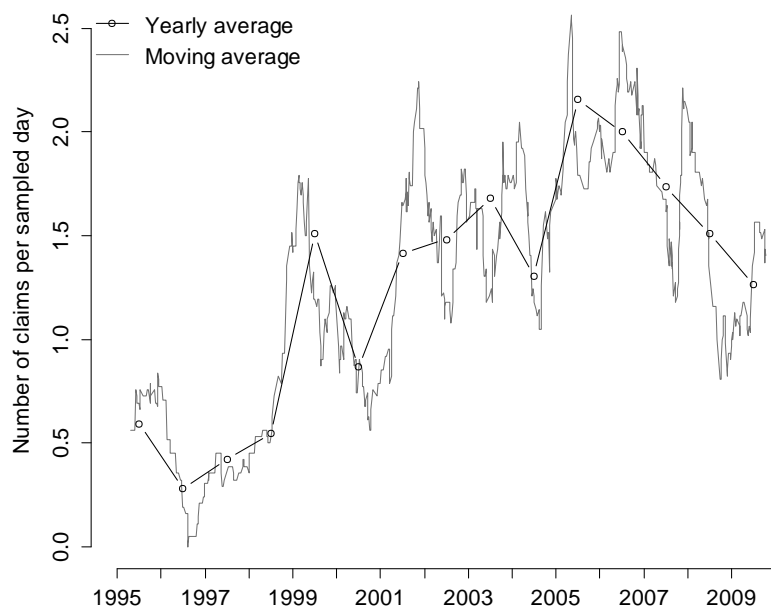


Figure 8.1 suggests that the perceived importance of immigration and integration oscillated between 1995 and 2009. Their salience was strongest after 2000, in particular over the first half of the first decade. This trend was probably reinforced by the continuous focus of sections of the media and party political claims therein on the rise of what were considered ‘undesired’ types of migration, such as asylum seekers or irregular inflows, which violated

the long-standing consensus to impose strict migration controls (Messina, 2007). The decline in the importance of these issues from 2006 onwards suggests that the relative salience of immigration faded as concerns about the economy/employment grew. However, in 2009 the importance of immigration was still higher than in the mid-1990s, and 75 per cent of British citizens in 2011 sought some reduction in immigration compared to 63% in 1995 (British Social Attitudes, 2012).

Figure 8.1 shows several peaks between 1999 and 2007. The first can be associated with the intense tabloid coverage of growing asylum and irregular immigration, integration issues related with the Stephen Lawrence case and the emerging inter-party competition between Labour and Conservatives on these topics. After a short-term decline, immigration became highly salient following the riots in 2001 with further peaks between 2005 and 2006. These years were marked by the intense prominence of these topics at the 2005 general election, the 5 July terrorist attacks in London, and the successive crises at the Home Office. Indeed, at one point several irregular immigrants were caught working as cleaners at the Home Office!

Evidence from opinion polling undertaken throughout the 2000s underlines that public concern with immigration rose from 1999 onwards and became a top priority issue of the electorate after 2002, including at the 2005 general election (Ipsos-MORI, 2010). Whilst this was a time of notably increased immigration, there are clear peaks which indicate that attitudes were not simply driven by bottom-up demographic structural change. Moreover, Ipsos-MORI work in September 2009 noted that whilst 70 per cent of respondents thought that immigration was a problem for Britain, only 18 per cent saw it as a problem for their own locality. The non-direct experiential nature of such attitudes points to the hypothesis that an important factor was the extensive top-down coverage of immigration in large selling tabloids such as the *Daily Mail*, whose front page headline on 1 February 2001 symptomatically proclaimed 'Asylum: Yes, Britain Is a Soft Touch!' The timing of the peaks in salience and public concern about immigration further points a clear link between news coverage and public opinion - although it must be stressed that the precise causal relationship between media content and opinion remains contested.

**Figure 8.21: Developments of Polarization and Tone in the United Kingdom, 1995 to 2009**



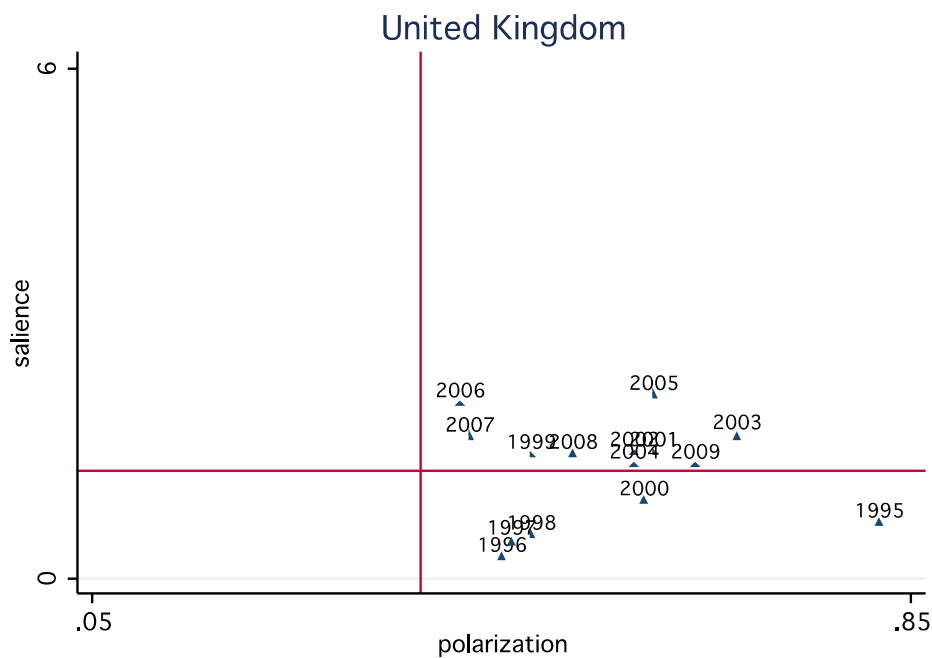
We distinguish between two elements of politicization: salience and polarization. Having looked at salience, figure 8.2 shows the over-time trends in terms of polarization, which is relatively high and stable compared to other countries in the study. The peak in 1995 in polarization can be associated to the urban riots in Bradford, the considerable focus especially among Conservatives on the Schengen Agreement, which permitted free EU internal movement between the signatory states, and asylum seekers who had been a growing cause of concern and who had been featured prominently with apparent electoral benefits by the Conservatives in the 1992 general election. As the 1997 general election approached, Labour was aware of the dangers of Conservative issue ownership of immigration. Its response has been well described by its shadow Home Secretary, Jack Straw: ‘We should not allow so much as a cigarette card to come between the Labour Party and the Tory government on immigration’ (cited in Saggart, 2001, p. 761).

The substantial expansion of levels of polarization in the early 2000s reflected the Labour government’s public policy shift in 2002, the intense inter-major party competition on these issues, and the emergence in second-order elections of the challenge of anti-immigration parties, like the BNP and UKIP. Consequently, there was a sequence of peaks of polarization



in 2001, 2003, 2005 and 2009. A notable link between these years can be established with the British electoral cycles and the occurrence of national ballots such as the 2001 and 2005 general elections and the 2009 European elections. The slight peak in 2003 corresponded with the ascension of Michael Howard to the Conservative party's leadership, accompanied by significant media coverage of immigration, including even the liberal *Observer* newspaper (2003) reporting that: 'Britain's most senior police officer claimed mass immigration has created a "whole new range of crimes" threatening to overwhelm towns and cities across the country'.

**Figure 8.3: Combination of (salience) and polarization**



An issue is seen as strongly politicized if it receives significant political attention, while the issue is simultaneously highly contested. Figure 8.3 presents the combination of salience and polarization in each year. The horizontal and vertical bars in the figure denote the average values of these two variables across 15 years in all the seven countries included in this study. The figure shows that the debate on immigration in Britain is highly polarized. All observations are above the average. Moreover, the first decade of the 2000s has been marked by higher levels of politicization of immigration and integration than during the 1990s. These topics have attracted intense levels of attention in the British political agenda and claims of political actors have been characterized by high levels of conflict and opposed opinions.

Figure 8.2 also suggests that 2003 observed the highest levels of politicization within the selected timeframe, followed by the year of 2005.

### *Who politicizes?*

Having discussed levels of politicization, this section examines the political and social actors who voiced a position on these topics. Table 8.1 shows that a third of the claims (33%) on migration and integration have been made by the category of ‘government and judiciary’, followed by the category of journalists (31%). Typically government actors have more access to the media than the opposition: roughly twice as many claims of the government make it into the newspapers compared to other parliamentary actors (10%). However, journalists also seem to have a more important role in the public debate on immigration than members of the parliamentary parties, and the dominance of the British government in steering public debate was challenged by sections of the media after the late 1990s. This trend seems to have been understated by previous research on the role of organized groups on British immigration politics (notably Statham and Geddes, 2006). The tone of claims made by these actors was mostly restrictive (-0.1), and 74% of the claims analysed by this research contained an unsympathetic or restrictive character towards immigration and integration.

Members of minority groups have presented fewer but still a notable proportion of claims (11%) with an overt liberal character (0.7), which shows these groups have far more access to the media than anti-immigration parties. These parties account for a very low proportion of claims in the UK which contain an overt anti-immigration character (-1). This trend indicates the marginalization of extremist parties from mainstream political debate. Indeed, whilst some tabloids have set an agenda with a restrictive character about immigration, they typically ignore the BNP whilst engaging in the occasional direct attack. For example, the *Daily Express* on 23 October 2009 ran a front page headline ‘BNP Leader Nick Griffin is a Disgrace to Humanity’ to coincide with Griffin’s first appearance on the BBC TV flagship discussion programme *Question Time*, in which he became notably flustered under attack from the rest of the panel. The *Daily Mail*’s headline on the same day proclaimed: ‘Bigot at Bay’! Finally, other members of civil society presented a small but important share of total claims (13%) and on average these statements had a largely liberal or sympathetic character towards immigration (0.2).

Longitudinal analysis of the data suggests that the most striking trend is the relative role of the media in the debate on immigration (Table 8.1). Immigration and integration have been extensively covered by the British media, which especially in the former context have been more prone to select events and stories that are reported with a negative tone than with a positive or neutral character. Previous research on the British media and the representation of refugees during the Balkan conflict in 1999 and in the 2005 general election highlighted differences between the tabloid media and broadsheets. It was argued that the *Daily Mail* ‘generally perpetuates the existing known prejudices (...) whereas *The Times* is more creative and refrains from reproducing the stereotypes explicitly’ (Khosravinik, 2009: 493). However, whilst our study did not involve extensive discourse analysis of a broad sample of the British media, it does raise doubts about whether so neat a distinction can always be drawn between the tabloid and quality press. For example, some *Guardian* coverage was negative, possibly reflecting a journalistic paradigm of being attracted to ‘bad news’ and conflict? At times there also seems to have been a contagion effect on television, which by statute is meant to be ‘balanced’ but whose producers sometimes take their news and features agendas from the more controversial press. Although the average of journalistic claims is nearly balanced at 0.1, this does not mean that there is no polarisation. Newspaper coverage corresponds quite closely to general party support in an adversarial system. Overall, although there was generally supportive reporting on migrant integration and anti-discrimination legislation in media of different political orientation, coverage was far more heated and polarized when it came to discussing new immigration, especially in the tabloids. The 2011/2012 Leveson Inquiry into the culture, practice and ethics of the British press commented on the coverage of minorities that: ‘[although] the majority of the press appear to discharge this responsibility with care, there are enough examples of careless or reckless reporting to conclude that discriminatory, sensational or unbalanced reporting in relation to ethnic minorities, immigrants and/or asylum seekers is a feature of journalistic practice in parts of the press, rather than an aberration’ (Leveson 2012, p.673).

**Table 18.1: Percentage of Claims by Type of Claims-Maker, 1995 to 2009**

<b>UK</b>	<b>1995</b>	<b>1996</b>	<b>1997</b>	<b>1998</b>	<b>1999</b>	<b>2000</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2002</b>	<b>2003</b>	<b>2004</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>tone</b>
<b>Government &amp; judiciary</b>	41%	31%	59%	44%	33%	42%	42%	30%	38%	22%	28%	30%	35%	37%	23%	33%	305	-0,2
<b>Legislative &amp; parties</b>	7%	13%	0%	13%	5%	16%	11%	10%	12%	10%	15%	6%	16%	11%	7%	10%	95	-0,7
<b>Journalists</b>	19%	19%	18%	19%	26%	22%	24%	35%	29%	48%	24%	43%	25%	37%	41%	31%	285	-0,1
<b>Minority, pro-migrant and religious groups</b>	22%	31%	6%	13%	11%	7%	10%	9%	9%	8%	15%	12%	10%	11%	11%	11%	102	0,7
<b>Anti-immigrant movements</b>	0%	0%	6%	0%	4%	0%	0%	1%	1%	0%	1%	2%	0%	0%	3%	1%	11	-1,0
<b>Various other civil society actors</b>	11%	6%	12%	13%	21%	13%	13%	14%	10%	13%	18%	7%	13%	5%	14%	13%	117	0,2
<b>N</b>	27	16	17	16	84	45	62	79	86	63	96	100	91	63	70	915		

*Notes: Position is interpolated median of scores on a 5-point scale ranging from -1 to 1*

As was seen in Table 8.1, party actors are responsible for an important share of claims made on immigration and integration. In Table 8.2 the hegemony of Labour as the main claim-maker is evident (57.64%), as it was the governing party from 1997-2010, and these claims had a negative character (-0.15). The Conservatives, the second major party in terms of representation, was the next most dominant party with more than one third of the claims attributed to party actors, which contained an overt unsympathetic character towards immigration and integration (-0.66). The smaller Liberal Democrats have been relatively absent (2.62%) from the political debate on immigration parties, which reflects the domineering effect of the two-party system on third parties at the national level (Wunderlich and Eatwell, 2012). Nonetheless, this party framed immigration and integration in more favourable (0.25) terms than the two main parties. This trend suggests that intense inter-party competition between the Labour and Conservatives, with an overt negative tone, has been an important ‘top-down’ factor fuelling the politicization of these topics in the UK.

**Table 8.2. Which parties are claim makers?**

	Labour	Liberal Democrats	Conservatives	BNP
1995	30	0	70	0
1996	33.3	0	50	0
1997	100	0	0	0
1998	40	0	60	0
1999	94.1	0	5.9	0
2000	68.8	12.5	18.8	0
2001	68.4	5.2	15.8	10.5
2002	59.1	4.6	31.8	4.6
2003	47.8	0	47.8	0
2004	50	12.6	37.5	0
2005	40	0	56	4
2006	68.2	0	18.2	13.6
2007	48.3	3.5	48.3	0
2008	69.2	0	30.8	0
2009	61.5	0	23.1	15.4
total	57.6	2.6	34.9	3.9

The high levels of politicization of immigration and integration observed between 2003 and 2005 coincide with the years when the Conservative Party made as many or more claims about immigration than the Labour Party (Table 8.2). At the 2005 general election, the

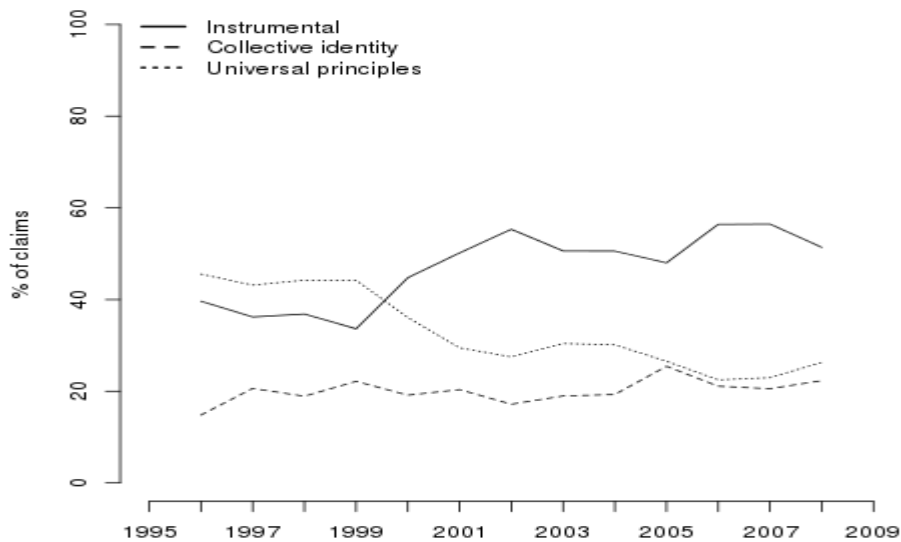
Conservative's motto was: 'it's not racist to impose limits on immigration'. By contrast, anti-immigration parties like the BNP played a residual role in the debate, though this party seemed to possess greater access to present its claims during election periods. The BNP enjoyed most access to the mainstream media in 2005 and 2006, reflecting its contesting 119 constituencies at the 2005 general election and the judicial trial of the BNP's party leader for incitement of racial hatred in Leeds (Copsey, 2009).

#### *How are the issues framed?*

Figure 8.4 indicates a clear dominance of the instrumental frame among the claims of British participants in this debate. This indicates that the asylum-seeker issue as well as increasing labour migration led to polarization mainly regarding the costs and benefits of migration. The collective identity frame, which emphasizes national identity and traditional values, was used particularly in 1996 and 1998 and again in 2004 and 2009. The latter years have been marked by elections for the European Parliament, reflecting the fact that immigration has been associated with the EU by UKIP and the large swathe of Eurosceptic press, which often features a traditional view of British identity and enemies, especially the French and Germans.

The frame of universal principles was used sporadically in the late 1990s with reference to the asylum debate and again with more intensity from 2004 onwards, a trend that can be potentially related with the recognition of free movement to the EU citizens who were nationals of A-8 countries. Although the instrumental frame has declined in recent years, it remains strong and raises questions for those who argue that opposition to migration, and especially support for parties like the BNP, is based on cultural more than economic factors (Goodwin 2011).

**Figure 8.4: Frames Used in Claims on Immigration and Integration in the United Kingdom, 1995 to 2009**



### 8.3 Explanatory factors

This section explores the four types of factors that might contribute to the variable levels of politicization of immigration in the UK between 1995 and 2009 as outlined in Chapter 1 (though our focus is on the ones for which there is the best evidence, rather than encyclopaedically covering all). It looks initially at the potential role of societal developments of immigration and integration in explaining levels of politicization, which are thus interpreted as the result of a bottom-up process. Secondly, we will explore to what extent politicization can be explained by the agency of specific groups. Thirdly, the levels of contestation are considered as a potential outcome of new policies. The last section examines the influence of the structure of political opportunities behind the aforementioned political processes in Britain.

#### *Societal Developments (structural, bottom up)*

Immigration into Britain expanded continuously between 1995 and 2009. The increase of foreign nationals from 1 to 1.5 million between 1995 and 2004 accelerated to mean that 2 million were resident by 2008, reflecting the intensification of inflows of nationals from East Central Europe after admission to the EU in 2004 and family reunion (Wunderlich, 2011). The relatively high birth rates among ethnic minorities have further added to the ‘immigrant’

population. As noted above, politicization is in part a reflection of these general movements and trends.

There have been notable cultural differences between post-war immigrants to Britain, and this offers some further insights into politicization. For example, the first wave of Afro-Caribbeans was largely Protestant Christian, whereas many from the Indian Sub-continent have been Muslim, and recent Polish immigrants are Catholic. Early racist activity by groups like the NF was aimed mainly at ‘dangerous’ and ‘inferior’ blacks, though ‘Paki bashing’ increasingly became a feature of racist violence after the 1970s. Even before the terrorist attacks in September 2001, the BNP was turning its attention towards both the terrorist threat and the allegedly ‘unassimilable’ nature of Muslims. During the period 2005-2009 claims referring to religious groups rose by eight times in comparison to 2000-2004 (Ruedin and Berkhout, 2012). Recent polls indicate a growing hostility towards Muslims in the UK that could be capitalized upon by anti-immigration parties: in one such poll 37% of the respondents stated they would support a political party that promised to reduce the number of Muslims in Britain and the presence of Islam in society (*Guardian*, 2012). However, some local studies have argued that a diffuse racism and especially economic envy is more important in explaining poor white’s violence, which is now primarily aimed at ‘Asians’ who often run small businesses and drive taxis (Ray, Smith and Wastell, 2004). A full analysis of this issue would require a more careful analysis of sections of the working class, including a male ‘precariat’ which is characterized by strong fears about the future and alienation from mainstream politics than can be undertaken here (Standing, 2011).

It is also far from clear that hostility to Muslims is a major explanation of either politicization or BNP voting, which is primarily male and working class. UKIP too has attracted a notable working class following, though in this case Islamophobia may have been more of a factor in some areas (Ford and Goodwin, 2014). The BNP made its first notable breakthrough at local level Burnley in 2002, where it went on to become briefly second only to Labour on the town council. Attacks on the Labour Party for neglecting the working class was an important part of its campaigning, but arguably more important was the widespread belief that there had been preferential council funding for the local Asian community, a myth which independent councillors and local newspaper had helped spread since the 1990s. Indeed, this point can be generalized into the hypothesis where ethnic minorities are geographically concentrated this has helped to give them a local political clout which has brought them resources but also



ensuing white resentment (Dancygier, 2011). Whilst this neglects the precise role of local agency and structures, it is an important corrective to an undue emphasis on Islamophobia. The point can be made another way by looking at two later BNP relative strongholds, Barking and Stoke, where local Islam was not a major local issue, though resentment towards Labour was.

Although most British voters' knowledge of precise categories of migrant and linked national and international legal frameworks is hazy, in recent years there have clearly been distinct perceptions of immigrants according to the purposes of settlement. Asylum is widely seen as an undesired inflow that places a burden on British society, whereas a 2010 survey found that 72% supported admitting more doctors and nurses from other countries to cope with increasing health care demands (COMPAS, 2011). There has also been a growing number who think immigration has had a positive economic effect, though the number of those who think the opposite has doubled between 2002 and 2011 to 21 per cent (British Social Attitudes, 2012). So, recent opinion polls mirror an old trope which distinguishes between a deserving and undeserving (white) working class, with only a minority expressing truly xenophobic views.

In analysing the role of structural factors it is also important to note that Britain experienced a period of continuous economic growth between 1996 and 2007, apart from the short period between 1999 and 2001. This period was interrupted by the 2007 financial crisis and economic growth has been weak since then (OECD, 2010). Therefore, the intense public concern with immigration at the 2005 general elections and the acute politicization of immigration observed between 2000 and 2005 developed in the context of low unemployment. The economic decline observed after 2007 and rise of unemployment were followed by the drop in the salience of immigration (see Figure 8.1).

Societal developments have undoubtedly been an important precondition to politicization, especially the arrival of asylum seekers initially and especially the wave of new migrants following EU expansion. However, as has been pointed out in the wider literature on 'demand side' factors, they offer a relatively weak purchase on the precise chronology of salience and especially the intensity of attitudes at both the national and local levels.

*Actions of specific groups (agency, bottom up)*

The direct responsibility of pro- and anti-immigration movements for the varying levels of politicization of migration at the national level seems limited in the British case. Although there was some change around the time of the 2009 European elections, in general the national media have tried to starve the BNP of favourable publicity, following a policy of ‘no platform’ (Copsey, 2009). Moreover, the National Union of Journalists has adopted a guideline on race reporting that accepts the need to report in a way that is not likely to promote racism (NUJ, 2012). Thus outside the arena of local politics where the media have sometimes set an agenda which helped politicize immigration, anti-immigration groups have only occasionally enhanced the polarization of the political debate on issues of immigration and integration, especially in 2009 (Figure 8.3). After its formation in 2009, the anti-Muslim English Defence League (EDL) briefly attracted major media attention, but recently the movement appears to have waned amid internal wrangles and doubts about what street protest could achieve. The EDL’s use of new social media such as Facebook has been seen by some as an important new means of politicization (Allen 2011), but it appears that many such ‘friends’ are more an example of ‘slacktivism’ than the basis of a powerful new movement.

Turning to pro-ethnic minority groups, these have been able to make more claims in the media than groups like the BNP, though some important recent developments are largely unreported. Against a background of growing fears about Muslim integration, the government’s response was very similar to the response to the reaction to the 1980s’ riots: ethnic minority interlocutors and associations were replaced by Muslim ones (Joly, 2010: 480). Consequently, youth participation in local politics became a priority of the government that has created youth forums and consultations, as well as the establishment of a national Young Muslims Advisory Board (O’Toole and Dale, 2010). Together with a shift among the young to religious concerns, this has helped to depoliticize sections of the Muslim communities.

In many districts there exists a sizable potential for a Muslim vote. The potential for this kind of politicization is illustrated by the fact that *The Guardian* on 5 May 2005 speculated about the power of the Muslim votes in crucial constituencies, implying that this might decide the general election in the event of a close contest between the two major parties. Moreover, young Muslims who have sought to confront the EDL in the streets could produce another form of politicization should the EDL revive in a major way, raising the spectre of

‘cumulative extremism’ (Eatwell, 2006). However, on balance the evidence points to the conclusion that the actions of specific groups did not have a decisive impact on levels of politicisation in Britain between 1995 and 2009.

*Policies (agency, initially top down)*

The importance of parties in politicization, especially the Conservatives, has already been noted. Here we focus on the question whether politicization develops in reaction to changes in specific policies. The British immigration and integration policies have been continuously reformed throughout the 2000s. The regulations on immigrants’ access to the labour market was liberalized during Labour’s second term and then restricted in its third term. In 2002, the Labour government liberalized access to the labour market for highly skilled immigrants and deployed new schemes to allow the entrance of unskilled labour for the first time since 1962. Whereas the nationals of the new A-8 member-states were granted free access to the British labour market in 2004 which preceded a peak in politicization in 2005, the citizens of the A-2 countries were deprived of this same right at the time of Romania and Bulgaria’s accession into the EU in 2007. In 2008, the Labour government deployed the points-system to reform 80 different entry schemes into the UK and announced that the Tier 3 for unskilled foreign immigrants would be closed in face of the intensity of intra-EU immigration and growing unemployment. This policy enjoyed a wide degree of support in the mainstream parties and public more generally, though in the adversarial British system the Conservatives continued to snipe about Labour’s immigration record whilst the Liberal Democrats maintained a more ‘European’ and liberal stance.

Furthermore, the dispersal scheme imposed by the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act accommodated asylum seekers in areas with low housing costs, leading to the ‘nationalization’ of an issue previously concentrated mainly on London (Messina, 2007). This has to be further understood in the light of the fact that opinion polls showed that Londoners were far more likely to accept that a multicultural society is a good thing: in 2003, 75% agreed with this statement, compared to 39 per cent in the North-east, where the BNP was to win a seat in the 2009 European elections (Ipsos-MORI 2003). Consequently, the politicization of asylum in the early 2000s can be also regarded as an outcome of a top down process reflecting the implementation of an unpopular policy measure.

Regulations on family reunion were also tightened in 2008 to prevent forced marriages. Access to long-term residence or 'indefinite leave to remain' was also made dependent on a 'life in the UK' test in April 2007. On the eve of the May 2010 elections, MIPEX noticed that the recent turn in integration policies made conditions slightly less favourable for integration, as the UK fell by 10 points - the most of any country included in this policy index (MIPEX, 2010). The introduction of these restrictive measures coincided with a drop of salience and polarization of immigration and integration in the late 2000s. Nonetheless, the UK continues to have one of the strongest anti-discrimination laws and equality policies in Europe, which enhances equal opportunities to new comers and members of ethnic minorities.

The policies implemented by the Labour government during its second term (2001-2005) seem to have sparked more widespread debate on immigration and integration than during its third term (2005-2010). The asylum policy was particularly prominent in the governmental agenda in the early 2000s, yet it was also highly politicized in the British mainstream debate as the frequent media headlines suggested the existence of widespread abuse and overload of the immigration system, including illegal immigration. By contrast, the introduction of restrictive measures largely in response to public concerns during the Labour government's third term was accompanied by lower levels of politicization on these issues, though the issue remained an important one for many British people in the 2010 general election and beyond as noted in the Introduction.

#### *The Political Opportunity Structure (structural, top down)*

In this section, we explore whether the levels of politicization of immigration are related to two components of the political opportunity structure: the openness or closure of the political system and the conflict dimensions within the party system.

#### *Formal political institutions*

The first-past-the-post-system employed in elections at single member districts in most elections is a major advantage for the two largest parties, though it is possible to win in multi-party contests with well under 50 per cent of the vote as the BNP has shown in some local elections. Moreover, some elections use other systems, including the list system in recent European elections. Small parties are additionally hampered by the need to produce a £500 deposit to contest a parliamentary seat, which is forfeited if the party does not achieve 5 per cent of the vote – a notable hurdle for parties like the BNP if it seeks to contest a significant

number of Britain's current 650 constituencies (doing so in 2010 added to the party's dire financial problems).

The 1997 Labour government brought devolution of some powers to Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish assemblies, but this action lacked significant effects on political opportunity structures of pro and anti-immigration parties for three reasons. Firstly, the dominance of the Westminster Parliament and Whitehall have not been touched with regard to setting the legislative and administrative frameworks for immigration and migrant integration (Flinders 2010: p. 184-191), although the Scottish National Party has made claims for a more liberal Scottish immigration policy (Hepburn 2009). Secondly, England has 83 per cent of the total population and 96.8 per cent of all ethnic minorities in the UK (Wunderlich 2011: p. 10). Thirdly, devolution has taken place in areas where there is strong nationalism, which often has an anti-English dimension. This trend leaves little political space for anti-immigration parties, whose ideologies are commonly based on a strong sense of 'Englishness' and whose limited organizational strength is almost entirely based in England.

The emergence of pro- or anti-migrant parties at national level is also hampered by the lack of state funding, which increases the importance of party donations. Although state funding was introduced for political parties in the mid-1970s to counter the advantage of the governing party over opposition parties, since 1999 the minimum threshold for receiving state funding is defined as having parliamentary representation of either two seats in the House of Commons or one seat and more than 150,000 votes at the previous general election. Consequently, an anti-immigration party like the BNP is unable to claim British public funding, though after 2009 it had EU funding for its two MEPs. Pro-migrant groups also face a lack of funding at the national level. Available funding is either based on individual city or county council initiatives, or via national programmes at local level, which helps to explain the ethnic groups' stronger levels of engagement at local level rather than at national level (Lowndes and Thorp, 2010; also Wunderlich, 2012).

Finally, although Britain scores the third lowest value for economic corporatism out of 27 advanced democracies after the USA and Canada (Vatter, 2009, p. 151), it has been seen as exhibiting strong informal corporatism (Middlemas, 1975). The British pressure group literature distinguishes between 'insider' and 'outsider' groups according to their relative levels of access to government and civil servants. The most important historical ethnic minority body, the British Board of Deputies, achieved the status of quasi-insider group

before World War II, and the British government has recently tried to boost other organisations like the Muslim Council of Britain to forge similar relationships, though these lack the Board's acceptance within their communities as the legitimate peak organisation (in part reflecting divisions within the Muslim 'community'). Consequently, Britain's electoral system and its weak corporatism reduce the opportunities to challenger groups making claims at the public level and do not seem related to the high levels of politicization of immigration in Britain during the 2000s.

### *Conflict dimensions within the party system*

The emergence of immigration as a political issue in the 1960s was partly related to divisions within the Conservative Party, as it was evident from the 1968 Powell speech. Henceforth, the British mainstream parties sought to present a united public face on the issue of immigration with the main exception of the pre-electoral campaign for the 2001 general election. The Conservative party leader William Hague placed strong emphasis on asylum throughout the campaign for the 2000 local elections, contributing to the intense politicization of immigration and integration issues in this year. Nevertheless, Hague was forced to retreat on the issue after a Conservative MP, John Townend, blamed immigration for undermining British society and fostering high crime rates (Bartle et al., 2002). Faced with accusations of Conservative racism, Hague publicly criticized Townend and removed this topic from the Conservatives' electoral campaign. Against a background of growing public concern about immigration, the Conservatives strongly featured immigration in their 2005 campaign. However, this appears to have lost as many votes to the pro-migrant Liberal Democrats as it gained from more right-wing parties and former non-voters, and the new leadership sought to silence harder line right-wingers on this issues in an attempt to pitch more for the centre ground. Cracks also emerged within the Labour Party over the government's management of borders through its third period of office especially from critics with more 'Old' Labour links with unions and/or supporters of greater welfare, though these were never a major threat to a party which sought to portray as united a front as possible running into the 2010 general election. Thus in general, divisions within the two dominant British parties appear to have been a factor tending towards de-politicization, unlike the competition between parties that on occasion has led the Conservative Party to playing the 'race card'.

## 8.4 Conclusion

The above analysis indicates that agency bottom-up approaches did not offer significant explanatory insights. Structural bottom-up factors matter for salience, but do not account for chronology and polarisation. Structural top down approaches to some degree and agency top down (policies) have an effect, especially depoliticization by means of more restrictive policies in the later part of the period under study, though this cannot be fully divorced from the impact of the economic crisis and the adversarial two-party system. In general, top-down factors seem most promising with regard to polarisation, though it is important to note the limitations of the evidence.

This investigation has found strong levels of politicization especially of immigration (unlike integration, which there is far more consensus) in Britain, and this political debate was dominated by a clear restrictive tone. The expansion of their salience in the British media coincided with the intensification of public concern about new immigration. Although the direction and power of the causal influence remain unclear, this investigation has suggested that the British media have played a major part in the public debate on immigration and integration, though the Conservatives at times have also sought to use immigration as a political issue. It seems reasonable to hypothesize that the tabloids' overall negative bias on these topics has impacted both on public attitudes as well as on the political agenda. Although the government normally has considerable advantages in obtaining coverage of its policies and views, overall this chapter highlights the post-1997 Labour governments' inability to dominate the public debate on these topics in face of an adversarial stance especially against extensive new immigration of the British tabloids and the *Daily Telegraph*, reinforced at times by the main opposition party.

Paradoxically, whilst the proportion of ethnic minorities is higher today than a generation ago, the BNP has failed to achieve notably stronger levels of electoral mobilization than the NF in the 1970s, and has recently been declining. As some commentators have argued that around 15-20 per cent of voters hold views similar to the BNP (Ford 2010), this further points to the importance of agency, not least of the its leadership's inability to soften its spoiled identity and achieve the kind of more favourable media coverage which helped parties like Jörg Haider's FPÖ to rise in the 1990s (and which almost certainly helped UKIP in the run-in to the 2014 European elections). However, the claim about this potential also points to the need to probe public opinion carefully on these matters. A broad argument running throughout this chapter is that public opinion today is far less racist than in the decades

immediately after 1945 (though there is evidence that prejudice towards Muslims has been growing in some quarters). It is possible to oppose forms of new immigration without being stigmatized as extreme right-wing; and some views which mirror BNP ideology, such as support for strong leadership, might reflect an apolitical desire for ‘low cost signalling’ rather than authoritarianism. On the other hand, many people have developed the discursive abilities to hide views, or package them in liberally acceptable ways, and forms of ‘banal nationalism’ remain pervasive especially in traditional portrayals of national identity (Billig, 1995). There is also a need to probe the media more carefully, including its relations with mainstream political leaders and whether a more charismatic populist leader would be seen as a pariah, like Griffin, or an media-genic ‘personality’. Did the media reflect public opinion after the 1990s in its extensive coverage of immigration and integration, perhaps in an attempt to boost sales in a very competitive tabloid market? Or was it trying more to influence public opinion and policy makers? Although migration was not a specific concern of the Leveson inquiry into the press, its hearings have revealed a political leadership in Britain which seemed to have been in awe of the power of the tabloids and newspapers, many of which showed little inclination to paint a balanced picture of immigration in the UK.

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